



Jonathan Markovitz. *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xxxi + 227 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-3995-3; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-3994-6.



Reviewed by Bruce E. Baker (Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London)

Published on H-USA (September, 2004)

Lynching as Metaphor and Memory

The history of lynching is in the midst of a renaissance. Nowhere has the vitality of this topic been better illustrated than at the October 2002 “Lynching and Racial Violence in America: Histories and Legacies” conference at Emory University. As keynote speaker, W. Fitzhugh Brundage noted, this was the largest conference dedicated to discussing lynching since a 1940 gathering sponsored by the NAACP when lynching was still an immediate problem for the nation. Jonathan Markovitz, a sociologist at the University of California, San Diego, and the author of *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*, was a participant at this conference, and much of the scholarship represented there intersects with the topic of Markovitz’s book and can serve to place it in historiographical context.

Lynching was long the province of journalists and sociologists; historians were late coming to this topic. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s foundational book on the anti-lynching movement in 1979, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* and a handful of other studies through the 1980s began to probe some aspects of the topic, most

notably Edward Ayers’s first book, *Vengeance and Justice* (1984), which considered lynching within the continuum of the punishment of criminals in the nineteenth-century South. In the early 1990s, Ayers further refined his account of lynching’s dynamics in *The Promise of the New South* (1992), while historians such as Terence Finnegan and W. Fitzhugh Brundage completed comparative state-level studies that illustrated how and explained why lynching varied across space and time. Finally, two sociologists, Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, published the most sophisticated synthesis of lynching to date, the *Festival of Violence* (1995), which was innovative in that it was based on a new and more comprehensive listing of lynchings that sorted, confirmed, and expanded the incidents originally recorded by the NAACP and the Tuskegee Institute.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the completion of a number of other dissertations which are making their way into book format. William D. Carrigan and Michael J. Pfeifer followed Brundage’s and Finnegan’s model of comparative state-level studies so that we now have exemplary studies of quite a few states, including Georgia,

Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Wyoming, and Iowa. Crystal Feimster has expanded upon Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's earlier work in her dissertation on "ladies and lynching." In addition to this monograph literature, a number of case study articles appeared during this period in national, regional, and state historical journals.[1]

Once this framework of lynching's history was in place, other historians and students of culture were able to consider the place of lynching in American cultural history in a more sophisticated way than had been possible before. An early example of this work was Hall's observation on the role stories of lynching played in keeping white women, along with black men, in their places in a South dominated by white men, an insight then expanded by Nancy Maclean's influential 1991 article on the Leo Frank lynching. Inspired partly by depictions of lynching in fiction and film, Joel Williamson provided a psychological perspective on lynching ritual in his study of southern race relations. Trudier Harris's *Exorcizing Blackness* (1984) compared literary and journalistic portrayals of lynching. My essay in Brundage's 1997 collection, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, tried to account for the place of lynching in the folklore of white southerners. Grace Hale made "spectacle lynchings" an important part of her study of the cultural scaffolding of segregation in *Making Whiteness* (1998). The eminent scholar of southern religion, Donald Mathews, has explained lynching as "The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice." More recently, Amy Wood's dissertation on lynching, photography, and religion has tied many of the concerns of Hale and Wood together.[2]

It should hardly be surprising that this outpouring of scholarship on lynching should meet up with one of the other great trends in historical scholarship: the study of memory. How lynchings were remembered and how they affected communities later on had long been a minor note in studies of lynching, mentioned in passing. It was a forum on the topic in the *Journal of American History* in 1997 that brought the topic to prominence. Joel Williamson's meditations on what he called the "wounds, not scars" of lynching provoked a vigorous debate. A little later, I used oral history to consider how a number of lynchings in a single South Carolina county had been remembered and forgotten.[3] In *Legacies of Lynching*, Markovitz approaches these questions on a national scale, using elements of mainstream culture to explain how lynching became part of America's collective memory and why it remains a handy metaphor for racial violence.

The introduction to Markovitz's book provides both a discussion of the essential theoretical tools on which he will rely and a capsule history of lynching. The key concept Markovitz uses is that of the metaphor, as elaborated by Kenneth Burke. As Markovitz explains, "while actual lynchings worked to provide lessons about the nature of southern society, the trope of lynching has been used to make implicit comparisons between the nature of particularly contentious events in the contemporary United States and what is now widely understood to be an exceptionally horrific part of our national past" (p. xviii). One of Markovitz's points is that lynching was used as a metaphor for racism as a whole. It thus became central to the "common sense" of racial thought in America, borrowing the term "common sense" from Gramsci. On collective memory, Markovitz follows the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Marita Sturken, Teshome Gabriel, George Lipsitz, and Iwona Irwin-Zarecka.

Markovitz's history of lynching, in the introduction, is a deft synthesis of an array of scholarship, though it relies particularly heavily on Grace Hale's account of the rise of spectacle lynchings in the last decade of the nineteenth century, massive events drawing thousands of spectators and participants. The prototype for these spectacle lynchings was the 1893 lynching of Henry Smith in Texas.[4] Since much of Markovitz's study looks at materials from popular culture and the mass media, it makes sense to build on Hale's powerful analysis of spectacle lynching, but too great a reliance on the points Hale made about spectacle lynching could lead to overly broad statements that do not necessarily hold true for the diverse range of activities encompassed by the term "lynching." In *Lynching in the New South*, Fitzhugh Brundage pointed out that not all lynchings were spectacle lynchings by creating a four-part typology for lynch mobs, ranging from the mass mobs that carried out spectacle lynchings to small, private mobs acting in secrecy. However, if spectacle lynchings did get the largest share of media coverage in regional newspapers, is that not enough evidence that what is true of them is true of lynchings generally, with perhaps a nod to minor variations? I suspect not. Markovitz is probably correct to state that "the lynchings that were most effective as tools of political education and terrorism were staged as massive public spectacles," but it does not necessarily follow that these spectacle lynchings then exercised an overwhelming influence on collective memory of lynching. The attention to spectacle lynchings to the exclusion of non-spectacle lynchings suggests a reading of our own information environment onto a time and place a cen-

tury past. Obviously the lynchings of Sam Hose in 1899 or Jesse Washington in 1916 were huge events, described and promoted by the turn-of-the-century institutions of mass media, but that was a time not nearly as saturated by the mass media as today. Reading about a lynching in progress in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* was not the same as watching it on CNN. While many people read the major newspapers that carried blow-by-blow coverage of this relatively small number of spectacle lynchings, there must have been many more who read local newspapers with very little, if any, coverage of these events, if they read at all. Rural people, at that time still a majority especially in the South, were also part of information networks that were separate from major newspapers and based on word of mouth and local social institutions, such as churches and country stores. Overlooking these obscures the tremendous significance that non-spectacle lynchings, not to say various non-lethal or non-mob lethal interracial violence, had in particular communities and skews the sense of the memory of lynching as a whole.

Chapter 1 is primarily concerned with showing how the anti-lynching struggle worked to contest the meaning of lynching, eventually succeeding in making lynching a metaphor for race relations in America. According to Markovitz, diverse groups and individuals who opposed lynching “agreed that the struggle against mob violence had to be waged largely in the realm of public opinion and that they could not allow traditional lynching narratives to stand uncontested” (p. 2). Since lynchings were usually meant to be remembered as examples of white supremacy, anti-lynching activists were in some sense working on a parallel path, insisting that when later Americans thought of lynching, they thought of it as the most horrific metaphor for white supremacy. While much of Markovitz’s account of the anti-lynching movement will not be surprising to anyone with a passing familiarity with the work of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Patricia Schechter, and Robert Zangrando, his point here is novel, significant, and disarmingly simple. In some very important ways, lynching’s supporters and its opponents agreed on what the metaphor of lynching should mean, though they disagreed on the moral valence of white supremacy itself. More than most recent scholarship, except for Crystal Feimster’s study, Markovitz demonstrates the critical role that black women played in the anti-lynching movement. One of Markovitz’s strengths is his ability to lay out clearly and directly how various metaphors and images worked in the historical processes he describes. As a result, his discussion of black women

figuring simultaneously as activists against lynching, victims of lynchings, and victims of rape is lucid and persuasive. Markovitz makes clear, in even clearer terms than did Ida B. Wells a century ago, that the practice of lynching put black women who were raped by white men in an awkward position, because emphasizing their own victimization too strongly could lead to rash acts and further violence against their male family members.[5]

Having shown how the anti-lynching movement helped “metaphorize” lynching, Markovitz turns to a wide-ranging chapter on “cinematic lynchings.” Since Markovitz was “interested in the films that are most likely to have a substantial impact on a national collective memory, [and] this chapter is primarily concerned with mainstream films,” he naturally starts with a discussion of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (p. 36). He follows this with a discussion of African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux’s 1919 anti-lynching film *Within Our Gates*. While Markovitz uses Micheaux’s film to show just how powerful the metaphors and images of lynching had become and how the director was able, in a very short sequence, to quote and also disrupt those metaphors, his discussion of Micheaux seems to contravene his own rationale for studying Hollywood films. If indeed Micheaux’s film “was seen by relatively few people,” as Markovitz indicates, then it is not clear how it could “[provide] the most direct refutation of the rape and lynching narrative in *The Birth of a Nation*,” at least not in a way that would have much impact on the national collective memory of lynching (pp. 38, 40). Had Markovitz taken this opportunity to make an argument about the racially bifurcated nature of collective memory in America, it would have provided a way around this problem, but throughout much of the book, Markovitz seems to be insisting on a unitary collective memory for the nation.

Jumping ahead seventy years from Micheaux’s 1919 film, Markovitz next focuses on Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989), arguing that the metaphor of lynching also informs this film, but criticizing Lee for leaving unanswered the question of how the black community should respond to racial violence. Much more interesting than Markovitz’s analysis of *Do the Right Thing* is his discussion of two films from the mid-1990s that use lynching as a “hanging signifier.” Markovitz uses a careful study of the plots of *Just Cause* (1995) and *A Time to Kill* (1996) to argue that these films used the metaphor of lynching but made significant structural changes to the historical definition of the practice that ultimately emptied it of the clear-eyed racial significance that the early lynching op-

ponents and supporters in chapter 1 had given it. The chapter closes with two films that seem to stick more closely to the usual understanding of lynching, *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) and *Rosewood* (1997).

The book's strongest chapter by far is the third, which uses "lynching as lens" to consider three iconic cases of racialized violence identifiable by the names of the white protagonists of each: Bernhard Goetz, Charles Stuart, and Susan Smith. Markovitz sifts the news coverage of Goetz's 1984 shooting of four black youths on the New York subway to demonstrate that Goetz's victims were figured as the bestial black criminals of the traditional lynching narrative, positioning Goetz not as a criminal but as a righteous, one-man lynch mob. Particularly effective is Markovitz's discussion of the legal ramifications of the racial construction of fear. In both the Stuart and Smith cases, Markovitz shows how white killers were able to rely on the mainstream culture's fear of black criminality to concoct initially believable stories to cover up their own crimes. The chapter closes with a long but insightful account of the Tawana Brawley case, arguing that African-Americans' collective memory of racial violence, epitomized by lynching, helped account for the credibility of the Brawley hoax. As Markovitz observes, "People with any awareness of this history [of racist treatments of black sexuality] would have been likely to be suspicious of so pat and decisive a dismissal of yet another claim of black female victimization, especially since the dismissal seemed to be based upon racist stereotypes that were central to that history" (p. 107).

Given the power of this chapter on contemporary racialized violence, I had hoped that Markovitz would discuss the Rodney King case as well. It seems unfortunate to have left this out since it would have made a remarkably interesting link between the cinematic chapter and this one. Most Americans experienced the Rodney King case through the medium of television with the endlessly repeated thirty-second videotape footage. I would be interested to hear what an acute critic of both film and news such as Markovitz would have to say about how that scene evoked (or did not evoke) collective memories of lynching for American viewers. It would have given Markovitz another opportunity to more clearly elaborate the idea of racially bifurcated collective memory that he seems to be suggesting in the Brawley discussion (and that he could have also tied to Micheaux's film).

Markovitz's fourth chapter is a close study of the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991. While Markovitz is hardly the first

scholar to tease out what Thomas was doing when he called the charges of sexual harassment raised by Anita Hill a "high-tech lynching," the weight of the discussion that leads up to this chapter gives it more force and helps us see Thomas's remark not as a casual comment plucked out of thin air but the latest and perhaps most significant use of the metaphorization of lynching that is at the core of Markovitz's book. Markovitz does a good job here of showing that Thomas left Hill with virtually no rhetorical wiggle room by claiming the mantle of the lynching victim, much the same way that black women's victimization had been erased from the earlier anti-lynching activism.

The book closes with a conclusion that notes the range of responses to the Allen-Littlefield Collection of lynching photographs (the collection that was directly responsible for the October 2002 academic conference at Emory University). Markovitz goes on to link the lynching metaphor to several high-profile police killings of African-American men as well as a provocative note on the relation between the collective memory of lynching and of the September 11 attacks.

Markovitz has taken pains to present what are often quite complex and somewhat technical ideas in smooth prose that is clear and engaging. A few points raise problems, however, or at least a bit of confusion. In several places, Markovitz inserts illustrations of contemporary works of art that have a tangential connection to lynching, illuminated by only a sentence or two in the text. These seem to have more to do with the role of art in the contemporary antiracist movement, given here perhaps as an analogue or outgrowth of the anti-lynching movement, than objects of sustained analysis that would further Markovitz's arguments.

The vagaries of publishing are inscrutable, to put it politely, and it is never fair for a reviewer who sees a book months after it is published to carp too much about what hot-off-the-photocopier dissertation was not given its due, but even considering the inevitable delays of editing, production, and distribution, Markovitz neglects some fairly recent but very important scholarship on lynching that might have considerably enriched his study. Very little of the new scholarship discussed in the introduction to this review, and represented at least in part at the 2002 Emory University conference Markovitz mentions in his acknowledgements, makes it into the book. This is unfortunate, since its inclusion would have, at times, bolstered Markovitz's arguments and, at the least, would have provided a useful debate

that could have moved the field forward. For instance, when Markovitz suggests, in a note, that “there has been relatively little research done into the lynchings of Mexicans,” he might have drawn on the work of William D. Carrigan. Too late for Markovitz to have included was Christopher Waldrep’s intriguing study of the changing ways in which the practice of lynching and the term itself have developed. In a few other places, historians reading Markovitz’s book might wish for a little more awareness of the historical context of the events the author discusses. For instance, when he quotes the “to hell with the Constitution” comment made by “a South Carolina senatorial candidate named Cole Blease,” it would be helpful to note that Cole Blease’s terms as governor fifteen years earlier were nationally noted for their rabid encouragement of lynching. Despite these missed opportunities, Markovitz’s book remains an important study of the role lynching has played in American life and collective memory.[6]

Notes

[1]. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Terence Robert Finnegan, “At the Hands of Parties Unknown: Lynching in Mississippi and South Carolina, 1881-1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Crystal Nicole Feimster, “‘Ladies and Lynching’: The Gendered Discourse of Mob Violence in the New South, 1880-1930” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2000); J. William Harris, “Etiquette, Lynching, and Racial Boundaries in Southern History: A Mississippi Example,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): pp. 387-410; and Patrick J. Huber, “Caught Up in the Violent

Whirlwind of Lynching’: The 1885 Quadruple Lynching in Chatham County, North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 75, no. 2 (April 1998): pp. 135-160.

[2]. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 328-349; Nancy MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” *Journal of American History* 78 (December 1991): pp. 917-948; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Bruce E. Baker, “North Carolina Lynching Ballads,” in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 219-245; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Donald G. Mathews, “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice,” *Journal of Southern Religion* (2000) <http://jsr.as.wvu.edu/mathews.edu>; and Amy Louise Wood, “Spectacles of Suffering: Witnessing Lynching in the New South, 1880-1930” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2002).

[3]. The forum on lynching contained Williamson’s long meditation, “Wounds, Not Scars: Lynching, the National Conscience, and the American Historian,” followed by reader’s responses from several prominent historians. The entire section was titled “What We See and Can’t See in the Past,” *Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (March 1997), pp. 1217-1272. Bruce E. Baker, “Under the Rope: Lynching and Memory in Laurens County, South Carolina” in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 319-345.

[4]. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, p. 207.

[5]. Feimster and Huber also make this a central theme of their works.

[6]. Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave: 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

Citation: Bruce E. Baker. Review of Markovitz, Jonathan, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9820>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.